

Dr. Peterson

A Conversation Among Presidents

Wednesday, April 24, 2013, Historic Academy of Medicine

Question: Last year Bill Foege, the recipient of the 2012 Ivan Allen Award for Social Courage for his life-time work in eradicating small-pox, emphasized that the poverty was the major problem confronting our future. How do each of you think that your institutions may help address this extraordinary challenge?

- Last year I was privileged to be able to present Georgia Tech's Ivan Allen Prize for Social Courage to Dr. William Foege. One of the most courageous and effective things he did to eradicate smallpox in Africa, then India and then the world was to implement a strategy based on his summers as a young man fighting forest fires in Washington and Oregon where there were two maxims:
 - separate the fuel from the flames and the fire stops, and
 - the importance of teamwork.
- Once the virus was detected, Dr. Foege's team set out to identify and protect the nearest susceptible people and protect them before the virus could reach them, including tracking down visitors and relatives in nearby marketplaces to immunize them during the two-week virus incubation period.
- The concept used then, and to this day, in combatting other communicable diseases, is referred to as "surveillance and containment." Because it is targeted, it requires immunization of as little as 7 percent of the population, as opposed to 100 percent previously required.
- It was controversial, and there were those who doubted its effectiveness. But it worked and in the end, smallpox was eradicated in Africa. In addition to eradicating smallpox, in a career spanning four decades, his influence and impact on global health continued to expand and he became a preeminent leader helping to define policies and set directions. He has been described as having the rare ability to look into the face of a global challenge and at the same time see an individual with compassion.

- In doing research on Dr. Foege last year, I was struck by two things about him. He is uncomfortable taking public credit, for he believes any great accomplishment is the result of teamwork. He also said in his current book “House on Fire: the Fight to Eradicate Smallpox” that the belief that it could be done seemed like the most important factor in the global eradication effort. He wrote, “We all know the adage that some things have to be seen to be believed. In fact the opposite is often true: some things have to be believed to be seen.”
- As we prepare students to be innovative problem solvers, we are also working to instill in them a vision for things that were once thought impossible.